

Enhancing Democracy for Teachers

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Abstract: In the face of the century-old call for democracy in education by John Dewey, this paper explores how and why teachers have been systemically removed from efficacy within the educational system in which they live and work. The paper examines historical trends that work to limit teachers' institutional power and become obstacles to teacher voice. These include (1) accountability, (2) the intensification of teacher responsibilities, (3) a shift towards a technical approach to teaching, and (4) the negative public image of teachers. Finally, the paper explores the potential that teacher autonomy might be successfully reinstituted into educational curriculum and policy.

Until the public-school system is organized in such a way that every teacher has some regular and representative way in which he or she can register judgment upon matters of educational importance, with the assurance that this judgment will somehow affect the school system, the assertion that the present system is not, from the internal standpoint, democratic seems to be justified (Dewey, 1903 p. 195).

Although Dewey wrote this over one hundred years ago, the sentiment remains accurate – teachers’ knowledge and insights are needed more than ever and, sadly, seldom considered. In this paper, we explore how teachers who know schools best and care the most are systemically removed from efficacy within those schools. Our paper will examine historical trends that, we believe, work to limit teachers’ institutional power and have become obstacles to teacher voice: these include (1) accountability, (2) the intensification of teacher responsibilities, (3) a shift towards a technical approach to teaching, and (4) the negative public image of teachers. We believe these trends can be shifted. For us, the bottom line for evaluating any educational system is student learning; and, we believe a correlation exists between openness to teacher insights and student learning.

ACCOUNTABILITY

In many countries, educational accountability has become a primary focus for both teachers and policy makers (Biesta, 2004). In fact, as well-meaning as they might be, Biesta believes education reform efforts have created a teacher-limiting “culture of accountability.” In *No Child Left Behind*, the term *accountability* appears sixteen times in the table of contents. In the body of the document, the term is used in tandem with ideals of state assessment, state-set standards, state accountability systems, reporting,

funding, and achievement indicators (Presidential Document, 2002). Because accountability measures are implemented at the state level, Wills & Haymore-Sandholtz (2009) argue that these top-down accountability systems have combined with a heavy measure of nation-wide testing in the United States – focused on both language arts and math - that overwhelms the educational system with testing. Psychologically, such assessment overload carries with it an implicit mistrust of teachers – “Obviously, if we need all this testing, teachers can not be doing a good job.” But, the issue is practical as well. Time spent on testing comes from somewhere, and that somewhere is from teaching. In attempts to measure learning, actual learning time is replaced by time for sitting students in rows asking them to make graphite markings in tiny, confined spaces. Including the time teachers take to prepare students with test-taking skills, strategies, and practicing on ‘dummy’ standardized tests, huge amounts of time are stolen from student learning. Less time for student learning means lower test scores, which equates to more teacher blame, which equates to constrained teacher professionalism. In this ironic cycle, where testing pythons student learning, everyone suffers the consequences of lower evaluation scores.

Thus, constrained professionalism “represents a new situation in which teachers retain autonomy in classroom practices, but their decisions are significantly circumscribed by contextual pressures and time demands that devalue their professional experience, judgment, and expertise” (Wills & Haymore-Sandholtz, 2009, p. 1066). Contextual and time constraints, a result of state and national accountability, have impacted teachers’ autonomy in significant ways. As a result, as we suggest later, Dewey’s democratic vision has been challenged by top-down approaches where

teachers are called to respond to relatively autocratic mandates, rather than being profession builders.

Another example of increased accountability can be found in Tony Blair's reform initiatives. Although Margaret Thatcher, whose tough-talking rhetoric dubbed her the "Iron Lady," holds the reputation as Great Britain's conservative politician, Tony Blair's educational actions seem as conservative. In England, teachers were encouraged to make decisions: however, Blair's actions insured decisions moved along a conveyor belt towards government ideals for education. The format of this reform demanded that teacher decisions and goals be aligned with school or region's goals, targets, and standards. The school or region's goals had to parallel the state's educational goals, targets, and standards (Furlong, 2008). This highly-managed approach directed teacher decision-making not by professional judgment but by a set of goals, filtered down from a centralized mandate. Making decisions based on government initiatives resulted in accountability-based reactions where, again, teachers were positioned to respond but not lead and their ability to enact experience and voice remained limited.

INTENSIFICATION

The intensification of teaching as a profession is a second challenge to democratic processes in education systems: there simply is not enough time for teachers to do everything they need or hope to do. Years ago, Hargreaves (1994) argued that diverse student communities, reduced classroom support, increased parental expectations, and the rising demands of paperwork significantly intensify the teaching profession. Years and decreased educational budgets have done little to ease these demanding complexities. Such challenges, coupled with broad teacher

expectations that include both academic success and student emotional well-being, have increased teacher professional responsibility. More recently, Apple (2004) summarized the plight of teachers; “there is so much to do that simply accomplishing all that is specified requires nearly all of one’s efforts” (p. 190).

This intensification limits democratic opportunities for teachers in two ways. First, teachers may not have time to share their professional judgments or ideas in working groups, committees, or dialogues. Second, time constraints mean teachers are so preoccupied with the immediate decisions of their work that they are unable to stay current with research (Apple, 2004; Hargreaves, 1994). Such intensification contributes to limiting or silencing teacher voices and perspectives or, perhaps more to the point, pushes teacher concerns towards more pressing needs.

DESKILLING

In addition to increasing accountability and intensification, another aspect that reduces teacher democratic input is the recent trend to transform teaching from a professional vocation to a technical job – a process often described as deskilling. Tony Blair’s effort to redefine what it means to be a professional teacher is an example of such deskilling. By redefining professionalism, teachers’ voices were systematically eliminated. Many teachers even came to believe they could no longer enter a discourse that would define or direct their own profession.

Teachers highly value their knowledge about the complexities of teaching and believe this knowledge is a significant criterion for professionalism (Swann, McIntyre, Pell, Hargreaves, & Cunningham, 2010). However, the increasing management focus in North America combines with the hierarchical structures present in even well-meaning

conservative educational movements (e.g. Blair) to devalue the professional knowledge of teachers and limit teachers' opportunities to professionalize their work. Furlong (2008) defines this tendency as technical-rational 'professionalism,' an approach he believes emphasizes teacher as technician. As professional aspects of teaching are squeezed away, the worthiness of teacher perspective is devalued. By becoming technicians, teachers also become increasingly less capable of providing the sound judgment Dewey believed could inform matters of educational importance. How effective, in Dewey's or anyone's belief system, is an educational system without the discriminating, professional judgment of most of its members?

Another example of deskilling occurs as teachers become more dependent on 'expert' materials and approaches. Apple (2004) argues that intellectual deskilling occurs when workers are cut off from their own fields of interest and increasingly rely on ideas and processes provided by 'authorities.' Treating teachers as technicians is evident in the production of step-by-step, "teacher-proof" materials and manuals (Apple, 2004; Hargreaves, 1994; Joseph, 2000). Perhaps no one ever sets out to systematically deskill teachers, but deskilling is insidious. In a study of Alberta teachers, during a time where centralized testing was worth 90% of a student's grade, teachers actually became active in the process of deskilling themselves by choosing to limit curriculum by prominently teaching to previous tests, because these examinations offered a clear picture of what curriculum would be tested (Runte, 1998). It all makes such perfect sense – until one considers the big picture.

Using previous tests as manuals exemplifies a narrowing of both curriculum and teacher professionalism. As teachers rely more on outside processes and materials,

they sacrifice the critical practice once considered their professional role. As a result, they become progressively more technical in their teaching approaches and less knowledgeable in their professional discourses. They become less likely to engage democratic dialogues of educational importance and less able to engage these dialogues wisely. The deep professional insights of teachers are exchanged for techniques – as if teaching were a bag of magic beans, but this time the ogre (and not Jack) wins.

TEACHER MISTRUST

The last trend in education that threatens teachers' democratic opportunities is the tendency of the public to mistrust teachers. When initiating reform in England, Tony Blair hoped to establish teaching as an attractive job; and, to Blair's credit, increasing teacher salaries, providing internal promotion, and creating a positive media campaign, did honor the image of teachers. On the other hand, revoking professional attributes of teaching by instating a program of government targets and standards sent an entirely different message to the public. One can never truly ascertain why educational policy is created: often, however, it seems exceedingly microscopic without adequate insight about a policy's impact. We believe politicians generally do the best they can; however, this "best" often falls far short of insightful – especially when one assesses the unintended consequences of policy decisions.

To convey the lack of respect towards teachers, Hargreaves (1994) provides several metaphors showing how policy makers treat teachers. In England and Wales, he laments, teachers are treated like naughty children who need strict guidelines, specific requirements, and the discipline of evaluation. In the United States, teachers are treated

as recovering alcoholics in need of step-by-step programs to support their instruction and management. To further demonstrate the declining image of teachers, Granger (2008) argues that the *No Child Left Behind* policy postured both policy makers and politicians as ‘the good guys,’ who demanded higher standards for teachers and students alike. In contrast, educators who opposed this act were presented to the public as the ‘bad guys.’ Such spin implies that the ‘good guys’ are the policy makers, while frontline teachers need increased accountability because they are failing to uphold educational excellence.

When teachers are treated or represented as less capable, how can public faith grow? As Witty (2000) suggests, governments and media have fostered a low-trust relationship between the public and teachers. Such images create or confirm suspicions that teachers are ill-equipped to partake in democratic decision-making. Without public support, teachers’ insights about educational matters are neither respected nor valued and they are less likely to engage democratically in their own practice.

In a North American example of the devastating impact of lowering teacher image, in September 2010, *The LA Times* rated the effectiveness of its city’s teachers. In their attempt to ‘improve’ education, they posted the names of teachers with low math and reading results in grade three and grade five. Canadian education critic, Peter Cowley, of the nefarious Fraser Institute, applauded the move: “As a result of the study, the school district can see which teachers are actually earning their keep” (“Let’s rank our teachers”, 2010). One of those teachers was Rigoberto Ruelas, “a dedicated teacher in South LA for the past 14 years, with a perfect attendance record, his family said he had been upset and depressed since the *LA Times* listed him as being ineffective”

(Cody, “The Media's War on Teachers”, EdWeek Online, 2010). His body was discovered a few days after he failed to show up to work; he committed suicide.

THREATENING DEWEY’S IDEA OF DEMOCRATIC EDUCATION

Several recent historical trends threaten Dewey's ideal of democratic education. When considering the move towards heavy accountability, teacher intensification, deskilling in ways that promote teaching as a technical profession, and the negative public image of teachers, teachers must overcome several obstacles if they are to engage in democratic processes. Reclaiming teacher voice in ways that moves education forward seems daunting, if not impossible, under such conditions. Ironically, much of the change that has handcuffed the democratic actions of teachers has been put into place to improve schools: here good intentions have had negative consequences, a case of doing the wrong things for the right reasons – as T. S. Eliot reminds us in his 1935 *Murder in the Cathedral* about Thomas Becket. As Eliot notes, “The last temptation is the greatest treason: To do the right deed for the wrong reason.”

Accountability has placed teachers in a position where they respond rather than lead, and this position is hardly conducive to democratic voice. On the other hand, teacher autonomy – a contrary ideal – may encourage increased decision-making free of government initiatives and directives. This direction has certainly been the case throughout the history of the Canadian-based Alberta Initiative for School Improvement (AISI) – a 12-year program of teacher-directed action research initiatives built around site-based school improvement. Compared to accountability initiatives, teacher autonomy in Alberta has encouraged increased teacher participation and leadership in the more democratic growth of professional learning. As Dewey (1903) hoped, such

autonomy shows how teachers “can register judgment upon matters of educational importance, with the assurance that this judgment will somehow affect the school system” (p. 195).

As well, in Alberta, Canada, a new Principal Quality Act remains undefined and open to teacher and principal discretion. To the extent that this new Principal Quality Act continues to allow school leaders to consider context, need, and good judgment, teachers will increase democratic reforms to their profession. However, if that Principal Quality Act changes from a discretionary set of contextual possibilities, that incarnate how good leaders *might* act with wisdom to lead their schools, to a narrow checklist of competencies to be evaluated by outside ‘experts,’ one can envision the possibility to once again limit the professionalism and democratic actions of Alberta’s school leaders.

Certainly, one can understand the logic of standardization. However, when standardization creates cookie-cutter leadership – where every leader is shaped to look and act the same, regardless of contextual and site-based needs, teachers and principals become technicians on an assembly line of education – turning out cookies or widgets or children who also must look and act the same, all measured, sorted, and ranked using comprehensive high-stakes, content-based exams. Such is the creeping hegemony of standardization when democratic wisdom is hammered down by mistrust.

SUMMARY

This paper has considered current educational trends that might threaten opportunities for teacher voice and representation. Questions remain about how limiting teacher voice might impact student learning and teacher work. How can policy makers

and teachers resituate themselves so they may work side-to-side, rather than in hierarchical, power-imbued structures? How might a secure democratic framework be realized where teachers can partake in formal democratic practices to lead education from the wisdom of experience?

An interesting direction for study would be ways to help policy makers make decisions based on research, effective practices from other settings, and teacher insights. Examples such as the Alberta Initiative for School Improvement and the Principal Quality Act suggest opportunities where policy makers might invite teachers into education reform; but teachers must also advocate for their own opportunities to speak for their profession. In the same way this paper was informed by research, teachers can become researchers moving beyond the scope of their classrooms through university-based, academic inquiry or by leading their own action research initiatives. Research suggests that shared and distributed leadership; building social and academic networks; and honoring field-based, local experts increases student learning and builds stronger and more professional teachers. Initiatives such as the Alberta Initiative for School Improvement have proved the democratic potential of increased teacher voice in Alberta. There seems no reason such democratic action cannot work more globally.

The dialogue Dewey inspired continues. Hopefully this dialogue can unfold with a greater emphasis of diverse perspectives. In what ethical directions could education reform if the perspectives of stakeholders were honored? First among these stakeholders are teachers – and their democratic leadership is needed if the whole system is to improve.

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